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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CANBERRA 001455

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SUBJECT: PM HOWARD ENLISTS MUSLIM LEADERS TO COMBAT  
EXTREMISM IN THEIR COMMUNITIES

REF: A. CANBERRA 1423

[1](#)B. CANBERRA 1381

Classified By: Political Counselor Woo Lee for reasons 1.4 (b/d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Prime Minister John Howard and thirteen Australian Muslim leaders met at an August 23 "summit" to find ways in which the government and Islamic leaders could work together more closely to combat the spread of extremism within Australia's Islamic community (Refs A and B). After the meeting, the PM and the Muslim representatives jointly issued a statement of principles condemning terrorism and laying out a framework for further dialogue and action. Future meetings will consider issues such as the training of imams and curricula at Islamic schools. Plans for the summit received criticism from some quarters for not being "inclusive" enough, because the PM refused to invite some of the most vocal radical clerics (Ref B). The PM was unapologetic, however, saying that his purpose was not to "change the minds of people who are hardened fanatics," but rather to curtail their influence. END SUMMARY.

Terrorism Condemned, Australian Values Praised

[1](#)2. (C) As part of the Australian Government's efforts in the wake of the London bombings to reduce the likelihood of domestically-nurtured terrorism, Prime Minister Howard on August 23 hosted a summit with thirteen prominent Australian Muslims to ask for their help in battling extremist ideology within their communities. After a two-hour meeting, Howard and the Muslim leaders issued a joint statement of principles rejecting and denouncing terrorism and committing to work together to promote understanding and combat extremism. In the statement, the Muslim leaders agreed that they each had a responsibility "to challenge and to counteract" would-be terrorists. With government political and perhaps future financial support, the leaders agreed to take the initiative to foster "mutual understanding and Australian values" and to challenge advocacy of violence and extremism within Islamic organizations and their communities more generally. For its part, the government said it would seek the cooperation of state and territory governments at a special meeting of the Council of Australian Governments scheduled to be convened by the PM on September 27 (Ref A) in an effort to design a national strategy to address intolerance and the promotion of violence.

Practical Dialogue

[1](#)3. (C) PM Howard also announced that John Cobb, his Junior Minister for Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs, would convene future meetings with the Muslim leaders and involve other relevant ministers for specific topics as appropriate. Participants would break into small groups to develop practical policy recommendations for the government on issues such as the training of imams, curricula in Islamic schools, Muslim youth, and the role of women. Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) Senior Adviser for Domestic Security Policy Sarah Chidgey told us that the next meeting with Muslim leaders would take place in Melbourne on August 31, with subsequent regional meetings in Brisbane and Perth.

PM Defends Guestlist

[1](#)4. (U) According to press reports, PM Howard opened the summit with frank remarks stating that Australia was not immune from terrorist attacks and that anyone who thought Australia could escape terrorism was "deluding themselves." Howard emphasized that his purpose in convening the meeting was to identify ways of preventing the emergence of terrorist behavior and that he had engaged the Islamic community because the common thread in most terrorist attacks in recent years was that those attacks had occurred "perversely in the name of Islam." He acknowledged that the ability of the government to eradicate extremism by legislation was limited and that was why he looked to Muslim leaders to influence their communities against embracing violence. Legislation was necessary to protect the community, Howard said, but the government had to "win the hearts and minds" of people as well.

[1](#)5. (U) Amidst continued criticism from parts of the press

and excluded clerics that his guestlist for the summit was not "inclusive," Howard was steadfast in reiterating in both his opening remarks at the meeting and subsequent media interviews his reasons for not inviting the most radical Muslim clerics (Refs A and B). He made no apology for not inviting people with extreme views because they would have dominated media coverage and obscured the summit's more important purposes. "You won't change the minds of people who are hardened fanatics and hardened extremists," the PM said. "You have to identify them and take measures to ensure that they don't become a problem. The main aim of policy at present is to make sure that young and impressionable people in the Islamic community do not come under the sway or the influence of those hardened fanatics," he argued.

#### Muslim Leaders (Mostly) Make the Right Sounds

16. (U) Dr. Ameer Ali, President of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils (AFIC), said in his opening remarks that the summit was an "historic event" since no previous PM had invited the Muslim community for open talks about problems facing the country and the Islamic community in particular. While he acknowledged that there might be differences in political points of view among the participants, Ali assured the media that the vast majority of Muslims shared the same values as other Australians. "We are Muslims but we are Australian Muslims, (and) that identity must be preserved all the time," he said. Ali also emphasized again that the majority of the Muslim community did not see Osama bin Laden as a leader, rejecting the position of a few radical clerics who had called bin Laden a "great man" (Ref B).

17. (U) Yasser Soliman, however, a member of the Council for Multicultural Australia, cautioned in his own remarks at the press conference that the Muslim community was a diverse and vibrant one that should not be described only in the "language of terrorism." He also responded to recent criticism of multiculturalism in Australia by some politicians and commentators, arguing that the GOA's multicultural policies were in fact important elements in fighting extremism (Ref B).

#### COMMENT

18. (C) The summit was a positive, if small, first step in the Howard Government's renewed effort to enlist Australian Muslims to police extremism in their own ranks. The success or failure of the initiative will depend on whether it can achieve practical outcomes, such as changing the intolerant world view reportedly being taught in at least some of Australia's Islamic schools -- and, ultimately, whether it can better integrate the country's some 300,000 Muslim residents into the mainstream of Australian society.

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